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Experiment in which regular instructor has three classes meeting twice weekly instead of two classes meeting three times weekly, with an undergraduate English major supervising the third class period. Results showed that poorest students profited more from new system than brightest, but quality of instruction did not suffer.

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AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING FRESHMAN ENGLISH AT LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Talk Delivered by Nathaniel M. Caffee (Chairman of Freshman English, L.S.U.) at the Meeting of the Association of Land Grant Colleges, Denver, Colorado, November, 1957.

The Problem - To find other sources of teaching personnel. To avoid overloading regular faculty with theme reading.

Solution - Since other sources of personnel could obviously provide only individuals with less than first-rate qualifications, a decision was made to analyze the functions of the teacher and to assign to the instructor's aide the less demanding duties.

By-Product - Training of future English teachers.

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At Louisiana State University the Freshman English courses are given for students at three levels of achievement. On the basis of entrance tests they are placed in the lowest, the middle, or the highest group (English 1A, 1B, or 1C, respectively). A student might thus earn three, six, or nine semester hours in Freshman English. As the course is one in composition, it is essential that the sections be kept small; most instructors have three classes, but some have four. This semester (fall, 1957) there are 138 sections of the course.

With an expanding enrollment and with a decrease in the supply of qualified teachers, the department foresaw a time when, under the present system of instruction, it would be necessary for each composition class to be expanded to a size of forty to fifty students each, possibly even larger. It was recognized that such an increase in size would inevitably result in a decrease in the quality of instruction.

At present the English Department is using Ph.D.'s, people with M.A.'s, and graduate assistants as teacher . The only other readily available source of instruction was felt to be senior English majors, but no one was willing,

ED000338

quite properly, to give them full instructional responsibility. At Louisiana State University we are now in the second semester of an experiment in which the values of the small class in contact with a regular faculty member are maintained, but the services of undergraduate English majors are used. The teacher's load in terms of class meetings is not increased; e.g., instead of two classes meeting three times a week the regular instructor has three classes meeting two times a week. The undergraduate assistant supervises the third meeting.

Services of the undergraduate assistant are not restricted to the supervision of this third meeting. It is expected that he will relieve the regular instructor of many of the clerical chores involved in teaching, such as handing in absences and filing papers. As the instructor's theme load will have been increased, it is expected that he will train the senior undergraduate so that by the middle of the semester the assistant should be in a position to correct themes, and if he satisfies the instructor, even grade some of them. Of course the instructor will continue to grade themes and to check those corrected and graded by the assistant. The assistant also should be able to confer with students about their errors.

In the lowest section the undergraduate assistant should keep a record for each student of his most commonly made errors. With this list of errors at hand the assistant should plan corrective exercises and drills more or less on an individual basis. These exercises can then be done by the student under supervision in the third class meeting.

The nature of the assignments for the third class should generally be such as to require writing. A reading assignment has generally been found to be unsatisfactory unless it is followed in the same period by some written work. The third meeting is held in a room with other classes involved in the

experiment present. The presence of other classes necessitates careful planning on the part of the instructor and the assistant to avoid confusion and to maintain a steady rate of work.

The reason for placing the third meeting of several classes in one room is the increasing necessity for conserving space. At present, with a small number of classes involved there is no saving in room use, but with half or more of our sections involved a considerable saving would be made, thus freeing rooms for use by other classes. If the entire Freshman class were to be included in the experiment, it would be possible to take care of half again as many students with the same number of faculty members and to schedule their classes in approximately the same number of rooms which is currently being used. All this could be done at an added cost which would be nominal.

This cost would be made up entirely of the money paid the undergraduate assistants. Currently these assistants receive $600.00 a year for meeting three classes. However, the limit of three classes is maintained because the department is experimenting with the system. Even if the limit of three classes were maintained, the University would save from $2300.00 to $3000.00 on every four additional classes. The saving is represented in terms of money paid the undergraduate major and the salary which at current rates we might expect to pay an instructor to teach four classes. The experiment was initiated in the spring of 1957 and included three instructors and nine classes. This fall it has been continued involving six classes and two instructors. As a result of the spring experiment, it was decided that the highest group could make least use of the system. Consequently, this fall we have eliminated that group from the experiment. It is too early to tell the results in terms of student achievement. Thus far it seems that the quality of instruction has not suffered. The lowest group of students may have even profited. The chief difficulty in the experiment is the

planning which is necessary between the instructor and the assistant. A second difficulty is the resistance of some instructors to the idea of a student theme reader. On the basis of our experiment thus far it requires one to two months for the instructor to make such efficient use of the undergraduate assistant that his paper load is reduced to manageable proportions.

We expect to continue the program on a small scale. It will serve as a stand-by plan in operation which can provide a ready means for taking care of the expansion in student enrollment at those times when we are unable to fill teaching vacancies with qualified people. The cost of the plan is small. It does not pretend to improve instruction, but only to maintain it at its present level, to keep it from deteriorating. It keeps the individual classes small and, though it increases the instructor's student load, if wisely used it need not unduly increase the instructor's theme load.